



The "Boom-Boom" Girls of WW2

ORIGINAL

In the war years Elkton grew from a sleepy rural town of 3500 residents to a town of over 12,000, if you count all of the munition workers. My mother's aunt was the wife of a prominent barrister there and lived in a rather stately mansion. She observed first-hand her "starchy" reaction to the influx of "girls in trousers." It was not unlike that of the other ladies of the town.

"Rosy the Riveter" may have earned a place in World War II song and legend, but the story of these valiant girls who literally risked life and limb making ammunition has been neglected.

One of **Triumph's** main products was the 40 mm. shells (cartridge Headstamp **TEI**) to feed the countless twin anti-aircraft Bofors cannons on ships of the U.S. Navy and its Allies. Each shell contained about 10.7 ounces of powder for propellant and a projectile that weighed about 2 pounds. The practical rate of fire was 80 to 100 rounds per gun per minute. Naval vessels of all sizes bristled with pairs of the semi-automatic anti-aircraft weapons with insatiable appetites for ammunition.

Why the "insatiable appetites"? During the war the anti-aircraft projectile depended on a contact fuse or timed fuse to cause its high explosive charge to explode. Later, one of the best kept secrets of WW2 - the proximity fuse - replaced the percussion fuse for anti-aircraft defense. Unfortunately, the VT5"/38 vacuum tube-based Doppler-dependent radio transmitter/receiver proximity fuse nearly reached the era's practical limit of miniaturization. This was all prior to the invention of transistors, printed circuitry and micro-sized dry cells and never made it to the Bofors 40 mm. (1.57") ammunition until technology caught up. In time for the end of the war in the Pacific larger ships had anti-aircraft cannons of sufficient size (4.2 mm) to employ proximity fuses.

In the first paragraph I referred to these young women as being "valiant girls who literally risked life and limb" in this work far removed from their lives in the hills of Pennsylvania and West Virginia. Thanks to Mike Dixon of the *Historical Society of Cecil County* there follows a summary listing newspaper stories that reported deaths and major injuries at *Triumph*.

Before the War, in June 1935, there was an explosion that killed two workers. In October 1937, a man died in an explosion at the plant. The *Cecil Whig* of April 1941, carried an article saying four women injured in an explosion at the *Triumph* plant.

The issue of September 5, 1942 reported one death and three workers badly injured in an explosion at *Triumph*. On February 20, 1943, a *Whig* headline read "Seven Workers Badly Injured at *Triumph* Plant."

The same newspaper on September 4, 1943, reported that a young man was killed in an explosion. May 8, 1943, a front page headline said: "FIFTEEN KILLED; MANY INJURED BY EXPLOSION---FIRE." A sub-headline read, "Occurred at the Plant ***Triumph Explosives., Inc.***..." This was followed by an article on May 14, 1943 reporting "Two More Victims Of Explosion Identified."

Elkton and its neighbors all were *Sunday Blue Law* towns. Just over the state line in Newark, my hometown, the movie theatre, both bars, the one bowling alley, and all stores were closed on Sundays, as were the male hangouts – both pool rooms. Where was a guy or a girl to find recreation? In Elkton a large old house near the downtown area was to be setup as the U.S.O. club. This U.S.O. and its positive effect in helping the lonesome young ladies far from home is one of the subjects of the wartime articles cited below. (I happened to be working for a Newark electrician in one of my interludes from the university and he had the contract to rewire from the roof to the cellar. It was really an *old, old house* in which I learned "pull wire." For a cleaner job we also wired a new restaurant in Elkton. [Both experiences were far from my study of *Electrical Engineering* at the university.]

Pictured right is Miss Lillian Sample, a friend of mine from the early days of World War II, a former *Triumph* "boom-boom" girl, who worked during 1942-43, was recently hospitalized in Florida. Her younger sister, Mary Lou, who lives with her, said to me on the phone, "These girls should be recognized for the work they did during the war."

The question that popped up in my mind – "What tribute have they received in recent memory?" I didn't want to *reinvent the wheel*. I contacted three acquaintances who would know: Robert Thomas of Newark, DE, a mover and shaker of the *Newark Historical Society*; Rebecca Melvin Johnson, an acquisitions librarian in the Special Collections section of the *Library of the University of Delaware*; and Mike Dixon, historian for the Historical Society of Cecil County(MD). In addition, I undertook an Internet search using *Google*. When it was completed, it became apparent to me that my question was answered in the negative.



It became clear to me that my reminiscence about the "boom-boom" era might be of historical interest. My parents both worked at *Continental Diamond Fibre Co.* on South Chapel Street, Newark, DE and we had moved in 1942 to a rather large duplex just north of C.D.F. When the call came for housing for the young ladies

being imported in droves to work in the munition plants of Elkton, my folks decide that we had room for a few. My three younger sisters and parents slept on the second floor and I enjoyed a rather large bedroom cum study area in the finished third floor, alternating between it and the large sun porch behind the kitchen. My vacated attic accommodated several of these young ladies when I moved permanently to the back porch. Our first three roomers were from the anthracite region of Pennsylvania: Betty Warner, Peg Burson, and Lorraine Tobin. Lorraine later married a local young man who was in the Army Air Corps. Subsequently he served in the South Pacific, and upon his return to civilian life he was employed in the Bursar's office of the university. Later he served as a city councilman in Newark. Robert Thomas is their son.

Two boom-boom girls (non-residents at our house) whom I remember by name were from WV: Ruth Stull and Sudie Stump. At the time I was madly in love with Ruth - our trysts consisted of long walks in the rain. Sudie roomed on South College Avenue in Newark in the big white house just south of Mann's Lane.

Through my work behind Newark's *Western Union* desk I became familiar with place names in West Virginia - towns like War and Man as girls wired money to their home folks. My sisters had been moved to the sun porch upon my departure to the Army in early June 1943. Lillian Sample is a native of West Virginia, who had resided in Indiana and had attended high school there. She had returned to her hometown for a visit and at 18 was caught up in the wartime spirit and joined with a bunch of girls in being recruited to work in Elkton. At our house she shared the attic room at first, and later a room on the second floor with another girl from West Virginia, Edith Biggs. After a year at *Triumph*, Lillian secured permission from the powers to be to change jobs to the *Glenn L. Martin Aircraft Co.* in Baltimore as a records clerk. Other occupants of the third floor were two sisters, Mary and Marth, of Lithuanian ancestry, from Shamokin, PA.



.....A recent Photo of Gene HerbenerHere is how he looked when he was
acquainted with the "Boom Boom Girls"

When I began my research on the internet, I found the following two citations:

"The EPA "Superfund" (CERCLIS) List" from: www.epa.gov/superfund/
 includes:

"ELKTON TRIUMPH INDUSTRIAL PARK, 3 BLUE BALL ROAD P.O.BOX 1130 MD SIT
 #D985372127"

and also

Where no-wait marriages once drew movie stars, thousands of couples still come
 each year to say "I do." from:

http://magma.nationalgeographic.com/ngm/data/2002/02/01/html/ft_20020201.7.html

Upon request I received photocopies of several helpful articles

from *the Historical Society of Cecil County*:

Mary Heaton Vorce, "People at War The Girls of Elkton, Maryland"

.....*Harper's Magazine* , March 1943, p.347ff

Department, "Business at War, The Tribulations of Triumph Explosives,
 Inc."*Fortune*, March 1944, p.20ff

G. B. Arthur, "How the War Ran over Elkton"

.....*Nation's Business*, October 1945, p. 28ff.

Numerous articles from various newspapers, including

.....*The Cecil Whig*

.....*The Cecil Democrat*

.....*The Havre de Grace Republican*

reporting on accidents at munitions plants in and near Elkton.

by Gene Herbener, a retired College Professor

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